

God's Greater Story – Living in Love

13th Sun. after Pent. – 8/30/20 – Mt. Calvary Luth.

Text: Romans 12:9-21 Pastor Keith Besel

vv. 9-10 (literally from the original Greek), **“Love is without hypocrisy: Hating what is evil, clinging to good, in brotherly love, showing devotion to one another; leading one another in showing honor.”**

Introduction

✘ Our text from Romans this morning is challenging. Paul continues our sermon series; telling us here about God's Greater Story as he writes to the Christians in Rome. In this Reading today he defines authentic love; describing for us what it looks like to see God's true love in action.

➔ The temptation here is to go the way that all of the English translations have gone; as if Paul is giving us a list of commands from God. That's what the ESV in our bulletin does today. It says for example, “Let love be genuine. Abhor what is evil. Hold fast to what is good. Love one another ... be fervent in spirit ... rejoice in hope, be patient in tribulation, be constant in prayer”. And that's just a portion of the first four verses. As Paul's list goes on I counted at least 12 things; 12 attributes that Paul lists, not commanding, but describing this true love for Christians in verse 9-12.

➔ If it were true that Paul was commanding all of this of us, then we should feel exhausted; feel unworthy; and wonder if the Holy Spirit could ever form within us all of these attributes. So, what is a Christian to do with this list of words, describing non-hypocritical love?

✘ Well, I encourage us all to begin this morning by understanding that Paul is not setting out a twelve-step program to “build the better spiritual you”. Rather he is revealing for us the varied ways that God is at work in the world; in us! And so, in response to God's love, Paul invites you and me to learn of God's genuine love in action and then consider, in our own small corner of this world, how we too can plug into it; how we can participate in God's kingdom work by the power of His grace.

I. God's Kingdom Comes in Self-Sacrificial Action

✘ Think of what it was like for the early Christians in Rome. Rome was considered the center of the world. It had to be overwhelming. It was filled with monuments, arches, forums, and images honoring military victories and the imperial family. There were temples for worshipping not only gods and goddesses but even past leaders who all were now proclaimed to be gods.

➔ One example of this is the Altar of Peace that we have pictured for you in the front of our bulletin (or the home worship materials). It was a monument built on the Field of Mars; which was the space once used for military training. But now, at the time of Paul's letter, it was the site of much building and development. This monument to peace was built and dedicated about 13 years before Jesus was born. A few years later Nero had an image of it stamped on a coin. It was a monument intended to capture the glory of Rome and the imagination of her people; inviting citizens and foreign dignitaries alike to participate in the story of power and glory that led to peace in the Roman world.

➔ Surrounding the altar were walls of decorated marble, each side approximately the length of a large mobile home. At the top of these walls human figures were carved into the marble. You see this in the second close-up picture in the bulletin. These figures were life size, towering over anyone that looked at them from the ground.

➔ They were very realistic, portraying people well known within recent memory. On one side is a panel of Roman senators and priests. Another side has Caesar Augustus, leading his

servants and family in procession up to the altar. Through his military victories, Augustus established Roman peace and now he invited all people to live in the glory of Rome. This Altar of Peace invited Romans to trust in Rome's military might and thereby serve the Roman gods for the continuation of peace. Look at the close-up picture and you see there are even small children, from different nations; suggesting that all nations would come to worship at this altar and live within the power and the peace of Rome.

✘ Now, imagine being a Christian, living in Rome, surrounded by these images of power. It certainly encouraged early Christians to question the power of their one true God. They were gathering in small house churches. They had no political or military strength. They had no system of colleges and seminaries for training pastors. They had no libraries of theological texts defining the Christian faith. They didn't even have what we know today as the New Testament because they were actually living it out at that time.

→ But they did have the Old Testament Scriptures. And the proclamation of the apostles, including this letter from Paul, which they could read first hand!

✘ Taking all of this into account it's very plausible that these Roman Christians, surrounded by images and temples of Rome's worship, might wonder, "How can the kingdom of God come in to such a place as Rome? And how would they know if it was happening among them?"

→ Paul paints an overwhelming picture for them here. He gifts them with a glimpse into the ways of God. Paul knew then, just as it is for us still today folks, that there is a war going on; a conflict that threatens the very lives of God's people. Paul even includes the language of conflict and war in his list. He speaks of the enemies of God's people; tribulation, persecution, and evil that needs to be abhorred and rejected in God's name.

→ But, surprisingly, Paul doesn't call for aggressive violence or military action of any kind. No, instead, he calls God's people to serve His opponents in genuine love. In verse 21 Paul writes, "do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good". Overcome evil with good.

✘ Paul knows that the hope of all Roman Christians lies not in the figure of Caesar Augustus, but in the person of Jesus Christ, our Lord – the one who overcame evil with His sacrificial love and eternal good. Remember, that work of Christ was not a triumphal march toward victory through the streets of Rome but a journey of self-sacrifice ending in Jerusalem. In our Gospel Reading this morning, Jesus speaks of His passion. It is the Greater Story of God that saves the world!

→ How many of you have seen Mel Gibson's movie, from 2004, The Passion of the Christ? It portrays the extreme violence, in graphic detail, of Christ's passion, showing how much of a powerful force Rome was to be reckoned with. Behind all the marble friezes and beautiful monuments to peace, Rome was still a brutal power with a system of punishment that forcefully stripped all enemies of human dignity. Yet hidden within that brutality we Christians see the self-sacrificial work of God. We hear that story as it makes its way through the streets of Jerusalem in the battered and bloodied body of Jesus; our truest source of peace and hope.

✘ Gibson's movie has one scene that captures this vision of God as it brings peace to His people. It isn't in Scripture, but a place where Gibson takes a pit of literary license. Yet I believe it reflects Scripture and what God teaches us to see by faith. It's that moment when Jesus speaks to His mother Mary on the way to the cross. Jesus is bloodied and beaten, carrying His cross through the streets of Jerusalem. He falls for the third time and Mary reaches out as if to catch Him. Her mind jumps to images of the past where she remembers Jesus running to her in the streets of Nazareth. These memories only make the present more painful as she realizes that this time she cannot catch her son; she cannot save Him. This day her Son, Jesus is going to die.

→ But when Mary reaches out to Jesus, He stops and reaches out to catch her with a word. We see Jesus, His face bruised and bloodied; in the background is the cross, but His eyes are gazing at us with wonder. Then He turns to His mother and says, “Behold I make all things new” (Isaiah 43:19 & Rev. 21:5).

→ You see, at a time of great stress, when Mary’s mind goes to the past, Jesus offers her a promise of the future. When Mary sees death, Jesus reveals to her life. What the world sees as torturous destruction is God’s most creative and loving act ever.

✘ Yes, God is in control and at work for the world in the self-sacrifice of Jesus. Even His own people, the Jews, give up their hope and implement their own deceptive strategies and join in with Rome’s display of military muscle to destroy what they saw as a source rebellion.

→ But it’s then that Jesus offers His life in sacrifice to forgive all sins for all people for all time. This is the source of peace that Paul proclaims to the Roman Christians and to you today. But this peace is not something we only look back at in remembrance. No, Paul invites the Roman Christians and you to live in this peace today; to live in God’s genuine, non-hypocritical love as an active part of His kingdom; come to earth in us!

II. God’s Kingdom Comes in Seemingly Small Actions

✘ So, what does such a life in God’s love look like?

→ In our Gospel Reading, Jesus turns to His disciples and asks that they follow Him. “If anyone would come after Me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow Me. For whoever would save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for My sake will find it” (Mat. 16:24-25). What does this really look like? What’s it mean to take up your cross and follow Jesus?

✘ In Rome, the Altar of Peace was erected only after many massive military campaigns. It took 200 years of fighting and infiltration before they could finally declare victory under Caesar Augustus and celebrate that victory in this massive marble altar to peace.

→ Paul’s list in our text today contains no massive military victories. Instead, it celebrates the small, seemingly inconsequential ways that God acts among us in genuine love: Acts of brotherly affection; caring for the needs of the saints; taking notice of the lowly; and yes, even loving one’s enemies – even something as simple as offering a cup of water or a gift of food to an enemy who is thirsty and hungry. These are the ways of the kingdom of God.

✘ The Romans spread their influence and supposed peace by carving figures into marble and worshiping them as gods. The true God forms His kingdom not with stones but with flesh and blood. He takes you as His people; He washes you in the waters of baptism; He fills you with His Spirit and brings you to life. His work may not even be noticed by the world. It may not be celebrated as a major turning point in history.

→ No, it may simply be a moment when you rejoice with someone who rejoices or weep with someone who weeps. It may be finally submitting to God’s grace and putting aside my own sinful pride and making that first effort, as Paul calls me to do in verse 18, doing my part in trying to “live peaceably with all”; working to resolve the conflict in my life as Christ has done with genuine, non-hypocritical and humble love. These things are God and His genuine love at work; real, tangible expressions of God’s Spirit, bringing about a peace that our world cannot understand; a peace that is true and deep and lasting.

✘ Viewing Paul’s description of genuine love and his list of encouragements for us to follow in this way – not as a list of demands, but as a description of how God seeks to work in and through us toward others, changes our view of this text today. No longer is it overwhelming and impossible,

but instead it is comforting and encouraging. It's a relief to know that God is with me; that God is working actively in my daily life!

→ Consider for example the pastor who went to the hospital to visit a member. She was in the last stages of cancer; heavily medicated and unresponsive. The pastor went merely to "weep with those who weep" as Paul describes love in verse 15. When he entered the room he was surprised by what he saw. The member's daughter, with whom the mother had been in conflict for some time, was there at the side of the bed; putting lotion on her mother's body; starting at the feet. This was expensive lotion; more than the daughter could afford. The room smelled beautiful.

→ The daughter gave him a mischievous smile; making him promise not to tell her children. You see, her kids had given her this lotion for Mother's Day, "Because you never do anything for yourself," they said. And here she was, putting that lotion, intended for her, on her own mother's feet. Remember, her mother was unresponsive; she wouldn't know the difference. But the daughter did; the Lord did. What a vision of the kingdom of God; not carved in marble, but formed in flesh and blood; immersed in suffering; yet alive in love. Mother and daughter. Giving mercy. Receiving mercy. Surrounded by death and dying, yet living in an act of selfless, genuine love!

Conclusion

✘ This is the vision Paul invites us to see this morning. Sure, you can go see the Altar of Peace if you want. But you'll need to catch a flight to Rome and go to a museum. There, you can stand in a still, cold room and look at that earthly celebration of the power and glory of ancient Rome. Though it was built as a vision of peace and glory, we know today it is simply a relic; a museum piece; an object of art. The victories; the empire; the peace that it promised are all gone.

✘ But the vision of God that Paul writes about in this letter; the kingdom of God that came in Jesus; the peace of God that the Spirit works among His people; these remain.

→ Paul wants you to see God alive and at work in you today. He doesn't need you to go to a museum. No, he invites you to look around you at the people whom God has gathered in this place; your brothers and sisters in Christ; even those you may disagree with or with whom you may be in conflict.

→ Yes, here God is at work in His genuine love. He has called you in Christ; He has forgiven you and made you His own. And now He works in you and through you by the power of His Holy Spirit.

→ You can see Him at work, in the small stories of self-sacrifice; the stories of everyday non-hypocritical acts of love. These are the ways and these are the people through whom God continues to work; leading us all in a holy procession before His eternal throne; leading us in His Greater Story to live in His love today, tomorrow and each day until Jesus comes. Amen.